

By Sidney Smith

# THE DANCING MASTER

By RUBY AYRES

Author of "The Phantom Lover," "A Bachelor Husband," "The One Unwanted," etc.

"Teach You to Forget Him." HARDLY listened, he went on leading passionately.

"Marry me, and I will teach you to forget him. You're so young, you can't be on a waste of your life for a man who will never get. Oh, dear, I beg of you—"

Before she could speak he broke out more.

"I've promised to marry you. If this fool of a lawyer had not come to see you, you would have kept your word; you would have kept your word, Elizabeth."

She knew it was true; knew that she would have paid her debt to the uttermost farthing.

"There would have been no happiness for either of us," she said, with a bitter smile.

"I could never have been content to care—and you would have hated me. Nell."

He strode away from her and came back; his face was convulsed with passion and disappointment, and his lips were set in a bitter smile.

"And now I am calmly offering to write me a check and send me about my business. My God!"

Elizabeth broke down and rushed to stop him.

She stood where he left her, in the middle of the big, bare room, her face white with trembling from head to foot.

All the people she had known since she came to London had loved her, and she was unloved. Netta, Dolly, Nell, Farmer, Pat and herself—and none of them was happy, or likely to be.

It was easy enough to talk of never loving any one else, to say that, to other men should come into her life; but she was only twenty-one, and she loved Royston with that pathetic simplicity of heart which fortunately few women possess.

Never to see him again! To have to live all her life without him! It was not good-by for a day, or a month, or a year—it was forever!

Her own despair terrified her; she dared not give way to the tears that threatened to overpower her; though she was not to meet Mr. Junkers until the day after tomorrow, and she had to dress and go to work.

She would ask him to take her back to Dilbury when he returned; she would tell him that Madame Senestis would not keep her a moment longer when she heard that the engagement with Farmer had been broken.

"I can't hear it—I can't hear it," the words echoed over and over again through her mind with aching monotony.

She sat with her eyes fixed on the grass at her feet, a feeling of unutterable weariness weighing upon her.

"I thought it was you," said a voice beside her suddenly, and Elizabeth looked up into End's face.

For a moment neither of them spoke, then Royston's wife laughed.

"You're not going to say you're pleased to see me, are you, then?" she said cynically. "You did once before, I remember. Move up, and let me sit down—I'm tired out."

She looked down beneath her make-up, and Elizabeth moved silently to make room for her on the seat.

"So you're not going to Paris with Pat?" End said abruptly after a moment.

Elizabeth caught her breath. "To Paris?" she echoed, and her heart seemed to die.

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She almost laughed when presently he said diffidently: "There is—er—something I think I ought to tell you before we return, and that is—er—"

"Sneath—Walter Sneath is engaged to be married, and—and he has left Dilbury and my office."

"Engaged!" Elizabeth gasped. "Oh, I said so," she said. "Then quite."

"I—er—thought you would like to know," he said lamely. "Then quite."

So much for eternal constancy, Elizabeth thought bitterly, and wondered how soon it would be before one of her friends took her place in Neil Farmer's affections.

So Elizabeth went back to Dilbury, and life went on as if it had never been interrupted by those few short months in London.

Mrs. Junkers was more or less of an invalid, and gradually Elizabeth took the management of the house upon herself and looked after everything as she had done for her uncle in his lifetime.

So when, after a month, Mr. Junkers asked her if she would stay with them indefinitely she accepted with gratitude.

But when it was all finally settled, she went up to her room and looked at herself in the glass with a wry smile.

In spite of everything she was back in the old rut again—she had taken her place once more in the unrelieved monotony of quiet, uninteresting things, and passionate rebellion swept through her soul.

Was all her life to be spent like this? Was she never to know anything better?

She had written once to Netta, but the letter had come back from Mrs. Senestis's with a short note to say that Miss Stacey had gone away, and left no address.

She was in Paris with Royston, Elizabeth told herself feverishly; and no doubt she was quite forgotten.

The summer wore away uneventfully. Once Elizabeth saw a mention of Royston's name in a London paper—it appeared that he had made some considerable success with a new dance which was all the rage for the moment in Paris; and again in an illustrated weekly she turned a page suddenly and found herself looking into his eyes.

Just a head and shoulder portrait of him, but it tore open the wound afresh in Elizabeth's heart and broke her down into a passion of sobbing.

Royston had forgotten her—she had not seen him for five months—why should he remember her when every day of his life he must be meeting prettier and more attractive women?

She knew the injustice of the thought, but it tortured her all the same, and then—on day toward the end of October, she went up to London to do some shopping for Mrs. Junkers and ran into Netta Stacey in Regent street.

"Goodness! I was talking to my husband about you, a moment ago," Elizabeth exclaimed.

"Your husband?" Elizabeth checked. "Oh, are you married?" she exclaimed.

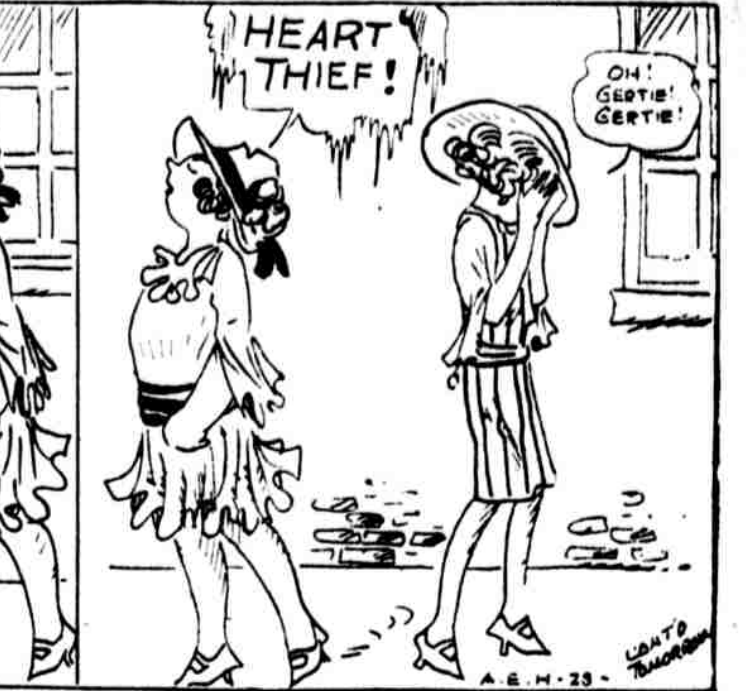
Netta nodded, flushing a little. "Two—two months ago. I went over to Paris with Pat, you know, and I met my husband there—her eyes met Elizabeth's rather defiantly.

"I know what you're thinking—but what was the use of fretting myself to fiddle strings for some one I could never have?" she shrugged her shoulders.

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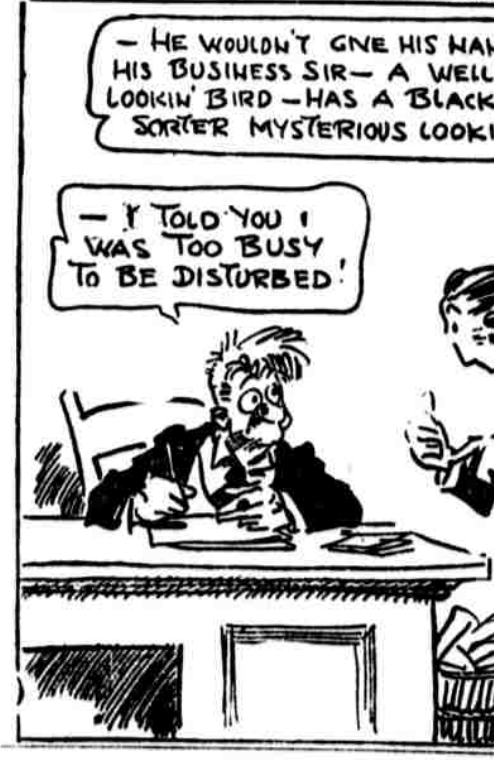
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